

**Big Cypress National Preserve
ORV Advisory Committee Meeting
February 16, 2012**

Minutes

The Big Cypress National Preserve (BICY) ORV Advisory Committee (ORVAC) held their regularly scheduled meeting on February 16, 2012, at the Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center, Ochopee, Florida. The meeting was called to order at 3:30 pm by Pedro Ramos, BICY Superintendent.

Committee Members Present: Franklin Adams, John Adornato, Robin Barnes, Jim Coletta, Brad Cornell, David Denham, Manley Fuller, Jorge Gutierrez, Chuck Hampton, Wayne Jenkins, Karl Greer, Laurie Macdonald, Barbara Jean Powell, Jenny Richards, Dennis Wilson. **Not Present:** Win Everham, Curt Witthoff. **BICY Staff Present:** Pedro Ramos, Ron Clark, Bob DeGross, Steve Schulze, Damon Doumlele, David Hamm, Susan Rossi, Rob Leonard.

There were approximately 12 members of the public present.

The meeting was facilitated by Delia Clark.

Mr. Ramos led the Pledge of Allegiance, welcomed everyone, and turned the meeting over to Ms. Clark, who went over the agenda and explained how the meeting would run. Comments were to be addressed to the Committee and not the NPS, as this was a Committee meeting open to the public and not a public meeting. The meeting was being videotaped for the record.

Approval of Minutes. The minutes of the December 2011 meeting were not ready for approval and will be discussed at the May 2012 meeting. The October 2011 minutes had been corrected as discussed at the December meeting, and Mr. Doumlele read the corrections, which concerned 1) inserting a statement that some Committee members felt that Mr. Adornato should not sit on the Committee, 2) trail evaluations in the "dog leg" of the Mullet Slough closed area, and 3) conditional Committee approval of a trail concept in the Stairsteps Unit. The Committee approved the October 2011 minutes as corrected.

Superintendent's Report. Mr. Ramos reported the following:

1. Work at the Mile Marker 51 access point off I-75 (Alligator Alley) has begun, and completion is expected in the summer. Work at a second access point at Mile Marker 63 is more preliminary.
2. The Hunting Management Plan is on track for completion in April.
3. The wilderness proposal is progressing, and it is hoped that in the coming months a completed document can be sent up through the leadership of the NPS to the Secretary of the Interior and ultimately to the White House and Congress.
4. Loop Road resurfacing is complete, and the road may be reopened next week or the following week.
5. BICY has conducted a considerable amount of prescribed burning this year, approximately 35,000 acres.
6. BICY has a good amount of scientific data potentially useful for the ORVAC. They are still working on a way to make it available.

In response to questions from the Committee, Mr. Ramos gave further details on the I-75 access points and the wilderness proposal. Mr. Adams expressed concern over fire fuel load in the hardwood hammocks and recommended mechanical fuel removal in at least the smaller islands.

ORVAC Protocols. Ms. Clark noted that considerable time had been spent during the first two ORVAC meetings establishing protocols on conducting business. Because of the time elapsed and Committee turnover, it appeared to be a good time to revisit the protocols and make any necessary changes.

Working Principles and Ground Rules. Ms. Macdonald suggested better definition of meeting attendance. Ms. Clark brought up the question of attending by phone ("virtual" attendance), which had been decided upon at a previous meeting. She suggested adding the fact that Committee decisions are made by consensus. Mr. Adornato said a clearer definition of consensus was needed. Ms. Macdonald noted that there are instances of "conditional" consensus, e.g., when a trail recommendation is made to the NPS pending ground truth investigation. Ms. Clark

agreed to draft language on consensus, email it to the Committee, and propose it as an agenda item at the May 2012 meeting.

Areas Within the Scope of Committee Discussion. Mr. Adams suggested adding consideration of allowable vehicle types, and Ms. Powell noted that the topic was already on the list. Mr. Fuller asked if illegal ORV activity was within the Committee's scope, to which Mr. Ramos replied that it would be if the NPS felt that the Committee's advice was needed. Ms. Clark suggested, and the Committee agreed, that the list of items within the Committee's scope should be modified to state, "areas including..." followed by the list, then "...as advice is requested from Preserve staff." Ms. Powell proposed adding adaptive management, law enforcement, and other issues requested by staff. Mr. Adornato requested adding the issue of where trails will be located, as well as hiking trails.

Areas Outside the Scope of Committee Discussion. Ms. Clark suggested deleting consideration of the Addition Lands.

Subcommittees. There was discussion concerning whether subcommittees can make recommendations to the full Committee or only provide information. Mr. Jenkins proposed adding that members of the public can be brought into subcommittee meetings to offer their expertise. Ms. Clark noted that the Agenda Subcommittee consisted of three people appointed since the formation of the Committee and asked if anyone on the Subcommittee wanted to come off or if anyone else wanted to be appointed. There were no responses.

Public Participation at ORVAC Meetings. Ms. Clark noted that individuals wishing to speak now sign up on a list instead of cards, as the protocol currently reads.

Trail Network Implementation. Mr. DeGross reported on the NPS' recent accomplishments:

1. The emphasis of the Maintenance crews is in the backcountry doing assessments in preparation for trail stabilization, which will take place once conditions allow.
2. Mr. DeGross is working with staff to put together suggestions from the Subcommittee and doing ground truthing on the suggested trails in the backcountry.
3. Website trail system maps were updated in early February.
4. There has not been much implementation of trails in the backcountry.
5. Trail crews are evaluating trail suggestions by quadrants.

Mr. DeGross answered questions concerning trail priorities in the next few months, Sandy Road, stabilization in Bear Island, and modifications to existing trails. Mr. Adornato asked how the NPS made a decision to open a trail in the Windmill Prairie closed area. Mr. DeGross replied that the NPS looked at the trail, and since the substrate was suitable, implemented the trail. Many of the closed areas were put on the map using the best available maps at the time. The areas identified as prairies can now be more accurately mapped. The trail in question was actually found to be in cypress and pineland, not prairie.

Stairsteps Trail Network. Mr. Jenkins gave a report from the Stairsteps Subcommittee. The Subcommittee, comprised of Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Cornell, Mr. Adornato, Ms. Powell, Ms. Barnes, and Frank Denninger, met on 1/23/12. Also attending were Mr. DeGross, Eric Kimmel, Charles Barley, and two wildlife officers familiar with the area. Mr. Jenkins deferred to Ms. Powell, who reported the following suggestions for ORVAC recommendations to the NPS:

1. The effects of airboats on the Cape Sable seaside sparrow in the closed portion of Zone 4 should be researched. The study should involve allowing airboat use on designated trails as a component of the study and for efficiency should include an evaluation of work previously done by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a former BICY superintendent, and a Stairsteps Gladesman.
2. The NPS should research the administrative history of the ORV Plan component that provides for only primary trails in Zone 4 and report those findings to the full Committee, including whether or not inclusion of secondary trails would be possible under adaptive management.
3. Adequate signage should be posted for safety zones and for official-use-only trails, such as trails that lead to Ranger residences.
4. The NPS should initiate a user-Ranger field trip to evaluate the on-the-ground suitability of campsites.
5. A future agenda item should be explored concerning the option of maximizing recreational use of Zone 3 by designating airboat-only and buggy-only trails in that area.

Mr. Fuller was interested in a briefing for the Committee on the current level of knowledge of sparrow activity in the Zone 4 closure area. Mr. Cornell emphasized the importance of good ground truthing on airboat trails to determine impacts.

Discussion of trails suggested by the Subcommittee followed.

Public Comment on Stairsteps Trail Network. Lyle McCandless mentioned that he had received numerous emails referring to a rumor that the Stairsteps Unit would be annexed into Everglades National Park.

Shannon Larsen urged the Committee not to make any recommendation concerning the Stairsteps Unit because there is insufficient information on whether the area is crucial habitat. She saw no reason for extending trails into an area simply because it is not accessible on foot. She did not see a need for landowner trails. Damage from airboats is common knowledge. Closed areas were closed for a reason.

Bobby C. Billie said that natural areas are God's creation and should be left alone.

Frank Denninger said he was an invited public member of the Subcommittee and recalled a discussion early in the Subcommittee's meeting as to why there were no secondary trails allowed in Zone 4. He said that much of the Subcommittee's work would hinge on the answer to this question. He pointed out that the agenda for today's meeting did not indicate that the Committee was to approve a suggestion from the Subcommittee, and he proposed delaying Committee approval until the Subcommittee could meet again.

Matthew Schwartz requested that the NPS conduct a study of airboat impacts on the Preserve's natural resources. Airboats are also a safety hazard to paddlers in the area.

The Committee adopted the five information needs suggested by the Subcommittee but deferred approval of the trail suggestions. Mr. DeGross indicated that BICY would be able to provide the information needs by April 1, 2012.

Blockhouse Camp Trail Review. Mr. DeGross described a request from the owners of the Blockhouse Camp to reroute a section of the Oasis Trail that is close to their property. The NPS wanted to hear the ORVAC's views before making a final decision. Mr. DeGross invited to the podium one of the owners, David Martin, to further explain the need for the request.

Public Comment on Blockhouse Camp Trail Review. David Martin said that a female alligator has been visiting his camp for 25 years, and he is concerned for her safety because of some of the people who may be in the camp.

Matthew Schwartz noted when a trail goes through a sensitive area, people go around it. Trails are not supposed to be laid in sensitive areas and then stabilized with rock fill. He was against rerouting the trail.

Jim Martin said that his original camp was moved to get it away from the road. There is no Everglades anymore; no crawfish. There is one raccoon that comes around his camp, the only one he has seen in years. It is not unusual for hikers and others to come into his camp and sleep in his bed.

Frank Denninger disagreed with the owner's comment that there was too much access. He liked the proposal because it promoted the concept of a bypass trail. Short bypass trails will benefit ATVs.

Bobby C. Billie said that the water was higher and there were more animals in the area 50 years ago. People will continue to steal from the camp even if the trail is rerouted.

Shannon Larsen questioned why the trail was located in a wetland. The subcommittees have a vested interest in where swamp buggies go and are not interested in environmental or wildlife impacts.

Lyle McCandless said that he and his brother own a camp in one of the most exposed locations in the Preserve and have never had a problem with the camp being broken into. Although he sympathized with the Martins, he saw this as too big an accommodation for one landowner. He asked that if the reroute was the better route, why did the old-timers choose the existing route?

General Public Comment. Lyle McCandless said that there are only about one-third of the ORV trails that should be in place. He noted that there were originally 350 miles of trails requested in the Turner River Unit, and the ORVAC reduced that figure to 110. He felt that the ORVAC did not have enough broad-based knowledge to address the issues and that there was not enough opportunity for ground observations. He hoped that the Committee would learn from this in looking at the Addition Lands.

Shannon Larsen referred to a newspaper article that mentioned promises made by BICY and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to hunters. She felt that promises should not be made to anyone until everything is taken into consideration. Protection of the wetlands cannot happen if the Committee and the Preserve continue moving in their present direction.

Bobby C. Billie said the Preserve, water, plants, and animals are protected by U.S. law. Each Committee member has the responsibility to respect the law.

Frank Denninger felt that the public should have been allowed to comment on the protocol agenda item.

Bill Clark said that this year he had seen groups of 2-wheel-drive, go-fast ATV users in Bear Island with no hunting gear driving fast and tearing up the trail. He was concerned that hunters would be blamed for this. He recommended that the NPS discontinue permitting 2-wheel-drive ATVs and street-legal vehicles. Silencers should be required on ATVs.

Matthew Schwartz said that the landowners in the Addition are not in favor of opening up the Addition to ORVs. He said the ORV Management Plan is a plan for the management of a high-impact recreational activity. He felt the ORVAC needed more diversity.

The meeting adjourned at 8:15 pm.